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ABSTRACT

Mountain Empire Community College (MECC), Southwest Virginia Community College (SVCC), Virginia Highlands Community College (VHCC), and Clinch Valley College (CVC), a four-year institution, participated in a cooperative professional development program to enrich their support staff and explore support staff dynamics. The colleges used the Noel/Levitz "Connections" Customer Service Training Program which focused on positive, effective customer relations at colleges. Workshops for MECC staff were conducted by a professional trainer, with representatives from SVCC and VHCC in attendance. After training was completed, participants were surveyed, and their responses indicated strong support for the program. The Connections program was conducted at SVCC by the research and development committee, with strong endorsement by the president, dean of instruction, and student services. Evaluation of the SVCC program underscored the value of the self-examination aspect of the program and the increased appreciation of their co-workers and students. Volunteers from the personnel office, academic support service, and counseling department were utilized by VHCC to present the program to support staff and administrators. Evaluation results included the following: (1) over one-half of the participants said that information provided to enhance understanding of customer relations and services was presented successfully; (2) most participants said they examined their own attitudes and performances more closely after the workshop; (3) most participants said that discussion with other staff members was the most valuable part of the experience; and (4) nearly all participants indicated that supervisors, other administrators, and faculty should be required to participate in such a workshop. Survey results and verbatim responses are attached. (WJT)

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SUPPORT STAFF DEVELOPMENT: A CRITICAL LINK IN STUDENT RETENTION

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"Support Staff Development: A Critical Link in Student Retention"

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Retention is what happens when improved programs and services lead to student success, according to The "Ins and Outs" of Marketing and Retention in Virginia's Community Colleges. Keeping that definition in mind, three community colleges joined together to enrich one of the most important links in the supply of service to students---the colleges' support staff. Each of the colleges used the Noel/Levitz "Connections" Customer Service Training Program which was designed specifically with college support personnel in mind; however, each college developed individual programs to suit their own needs.

The VCCA Convention in Roanoke gave the three colleges a chance to relate their experiences and to explore support staff dynamics and the personal reflections that resulted from the workshops. It also gave others the chance to see how several colleges can cooperatively work together, sharing ideas and materials, yet still maintaining the individuality that makes each unique.

A Cooperative Effort Begins

Dr. Ruth Mercedes Smith, president of Mountain Empire Community College, has expressed a strong belief in the importance of professional development during the two years of her leadership at MECC. After an administrator approached her with ideas for the professional development of classified employees at the college, Dr. Smith appointed a committee to generate a planned program.

After much discussion about what MECC employees would respond to and what program would best benefit both employees and the college, the Connections program by Noel/Levitz was selected, but now came the big decision---how could the college afford the program? Like many colleges, MECC does not have a great amount of funds set aside for professsional development because of other pressing financial needs of the institution. The committee had to examine other funding options.

The group realized that the Noel/Levitz program was particularly suited for colleges because Connections focused on positive, effective customer relations at colleges, so it was decided to approach nearby sister institutions about sharing the cost. Southwest Virginia Community College (SVCC), Virginia Highlands Community College (VHCC), and Clinch Valley College (a four-year institution) were enthusiastic about the project and so the program partnership began.

MECC Serves As the Guinea Pig

It was decided that MECC would begin the program and that SVCC and VHCC would study the MECC workshops and adapt the program to suit their own needs. The original committee that was appointed by Dr. Smith, agreed

to oversee the program. The committee was comprised of three administrators and the co-chairs of the professional group for classified personnel. Additional input from other members of the classified staff played an important role.

The MECC classified employees decided that they wanted to have an off-campus person conduct the program. It was also decided that meeting in a location away from campus would prove to be more conducive to participation by allowing individuals to relax without the fear that someone would call them out of the meeting to conduct other business. It was planned that the materials be covered by meeting oncer per week for three weeks. This allowed individuals to practice what they learned in the seminars.

Through a grant from the Virginia Community Colleges Association, funds were made available to hire a professional trainer to conduct the sessions. Representatives from SVCC and VHCC attended these sessions.

The workshops were conducted off-campus in a meeting room of a local restaurant. Funds from the MECC Educational Foundation and from the MECC Association of Classified Employees allowed participants to be treated to lunch on one of the three days. Employees were broken into three groups of about 18 people each. Selection was done on a random basis, with the condition that all offices had someone in them at all times to serve students. The times for the groups' meetings were rotated so that each attended one morning meeting, one luncheon meeting, and one afternoon meeting.

After the training was completed, a survey was conducted and the

results indicated strong support for the program. Most participants said that discussion with other staff members was the most valuable part of the experience. Perhaps the strongest information gleaned from the survey was most participants said they examined their own attitudes and performance more closely after the workshop. In fact, in several people, a marked improvement in attitude was quite noticeable!

SVCC Decides Support Staff Members Should Be Actively Involved in Pre-Service Days

The Connections program for SVCC was conducted by the Research and Development Committee. It was determined the support staff at SVCC felt they were not actively involved during pre-service days. Hence 80 support staff members were divided into four groups with each group participating in two-hour sessions for three days during pre-service. Two volunteer group facilitators worked with two groups on a staggered schedule.

Participation in the Connections program was mandatory for all support staff personnel. The president, dean of instruction, and student development services enthusiastically endorsed the program and encouraged the staff to participate.

During the course of the training, program participants became more aware of the job responsibilities and challenges of their co-workers. As a result of this awareness, individual staff members began to examine their own attitudes and performance standards as they related to co-workers and students. Evaluations of the program revealed the self-examination aspect was of tremendous value and that they had a deeper appreciation

and understanding for their co-workers and students. They realized how each individual contributes to the creation of a concerned and caring climate at the institution.

VHCC Administrators Participate in Workshops

Prior to the beginning of fall semester 1989, staff from the Personnel Office, Academic Support Services, and Counseling were utilized by VHCC to present the Connections program. Each of these staff members had been or presently was classified staff. Each presenter was a volunteer, so that their enthusiasm for the project would be obvious to each participant group.

Staff were allowed a choice from three presentation times, but attendance was required. A special feature of the VHCC workshops was concurrent administration participation. Although separate from the classified staff training, the administrators were exposed to the same materials and activities. The basis for this approach was to demonstrate in a meaningful way the VHCC administrations's commitment to quality student services from all support personnel. Participation from the group of administrators was spirited and meaningful and was described as very valuable to the group.

A Backward Glance

While participants from all three colleges agreed that interaction with co-workers was the most meaningful part of the training, it was very interesting/ to see that each had different answers about what did not work at their college.

At MECC, participants suggested that faculty and administrators be included in the training. The Connections training focused on the importance of good communication and good working relationships on campuses. The MECC support staff believed that this theory should extend to every individual on campus.

Other problems occurred at SVCC, where it is believed that the program would have been more enjoyable off-campus. Even though staff members were not physically in their offices, they remained technically "on call." This created interruptions periodically throughout the sessions. It was difficult for participants to concentrate on the program when they knew they had messages on their desks and students waiting for help.

The fall pre-service calendar was very full of activities, which also created problems at SVCC. Many offices would have been left unattended if the particular staff member had attended their sessions at the specified time. As a result, some staff members found themselves in a different group than the original groups with which they had bonded. This resulted in a need to rebuild the group structure as different members were added.

At VHCC, sessions were conducted on consecutive days. Some participants felt an interval of time between sessions would have enhanced the activities.

What We Learned

Participants generally entered this workshop with apprehension and resignation---staff development activities are thought by many to have missed the mark on occasion. The Connections workshops overcame the

inertia that many required meetings face. The overall impression of all three colleges of this activity was that it was positive, meaningful, and worthy of continuing.

Perhaps one of the most important facts emphasized in the training was in order for classified personnel to work with students to their fullest capacity, they must first learn to work with each other. By learning to make behavior consistent, the person becomes a better worker. The community college system is in the business of helping people to fulfill their hopes and dreams. To do this, students must be kept in school.

Most retention information mentions the importance of students being able to identify with a person on campus, whether that person is a faculty member or a member of the support staff. The classified staffs of the colleges are on the front line in retention, because they make the first impression on potential students and because they deal with students' problems. If the classified staff fails, the whole college fails. Our best people must be up front and professional development training is the best insurance to help classified staff to keep giving the best service possible to students.

The following is a compilation of the results of the evaluations forms of the Group Sessions of the "Connections" program.

1. How would you rate this program? (Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10, with 1 as a low and 10 as a high).

Numbers one, two and three on the scale received no remarks.

Number four had one answer.

Number five had one answer.

Number six had two answers.

Number seven had three answers.

Number eight had 19 answers.

Number nine had 15 answers.

Number 10 had nine answers.

One person did not respond to the question.

2. Which part of the CONNECTIONS program did you find the most value?

Comments:

"Learning that it is alright to feel good about yourself."

"Class participation; learning other people's problems."

"Group discussion."

"Group interaction---it's good to find out what other people think."

"Interaction/hearing first hand everyone's ideas."

"Group discussions."

"The personal interaction."

"Talking with other staff members I don't usually get to see."

"The discussions and helping each other work out problems."

"Discussion."

"Group discussion."

"Group discussion."

"Group discussions."

"Discussion."

"The talking sessions that we had."

"Discussion."

"The group discussions with fellow workers about similar experiences."

"Group discussions."

"How others problem-solve in various situations (group discussion)."

"Group discussions."

"The discussion and interraction of the group."

"Interaction with other participants."

"The discussions within the group."

"Group discussion."

"Discussion."

"Group discussion---positive discussions."

"The opportunity to interact with fellow employees."

"Being able to express concerns."

"I enjoyed the video examples and the interaction."

"The videos."

"The video."

"Positive vs. negative strokes."

"A review of things I may not have been practicing."

"I thought each section was very good."

"Self-image on the job---how improving yourself will help in job performance."

"Getting along with others."

"Dealing with student problems."

"Seeing situations on film and how to handle them seeing them applied to your job situation."

"The hole (sic) program was helpful to me, because being new on the job and around students, it helped me to not only understand myself better."

"The whole program was helpful to me."

"Giving positive strokes---how to feel good about giving them."

"Feeling good about yourself."

"Third session."

"How to deal with students problems."

"All parts."

"Final session."

Four with no answer.

3. Which part of the program did you find of the least value?

26 did not answer.

Two answered: "First session."

Two answered: "Nothing."

Two answered:"Video."

"The video tapes."

"The videos."

"None."

"I think the program was a success. All was good."

"I enjoyed all of the sessions."

"I didn't find any part that was helpful to me on and off the job."

"Everything was of value."

"All parts were valuable."

"All was important."

"None---its all important & a review of what we should always remember=common courtesy."

"Difficult to say---all areas were important and valuable."

"I found all the program valuable."

"Home work---time is hard to find to do it."

"All areas were informative."

"Homework questions."

"The reading---because we went over everything anyway."

"All of it was good."

4. Was the program (a.) too long? two (b.) too short? four about right? 43

One answered: "I liked it broken into segments."

5. Would you recommend the CONNECTIONS program to other people in jobs similar to yours? Strongly 42; Moderately 8; Not at all none.

6. How well did we succeed in providing information, ideas, an materials that helped you understand the ways of providing customer relations and service? (Based on a scale of 1-10 with one as a low, 10 as a high).

Numbers one through four received no answers.

Number five received one answer.

Number six received four answers.

Number **seven** received **three** answers.

Number **eight** received **17** answers.

Number **nine** received **15** answers.

Number **ten** received **10** answers.

7. What did you think of the ways the material was presented?

Twenty-two did not answer.

Three answered: "Okay."

Three answered: "Very well."

Two answered: "Excellent."

Two answered:"Good."

Two answered:"Very effective."

"Appropriate."

"Average."

"Very good."

"To help other people and a lot nicer."

"Excellent---feel comfortable."

"The materials were presented very good."

"The material was presented very effectively."

"Interesting."

"The presentation was good and effective."

"Adequate."

"Liked it."

"Well."

"Effective."

"Good."

"In the way to get everyone involved."

"Excellent---open way."

a. Was the Group Leader's presentation effective? (Scale of 1 to 10).

No answers for number one through four.

Number **five** received **two** answers.

Number **six** received **five** answers.

Number **seven** received **five** answers.

Number **eight** received **11** answers.

Number **nine** received **15** answers.

Number **10** received **12** answers.

b. Were the videotapes and exercise pages useful to you? (Scale of 1-10).

No number **one** answers.

Number **two** received **two** answers.

No answers of **three** or **four.**

Number **five** received **five** answers.

Number **six** received **four** answers.

Number **seven** received **six** answers.

Number **eight received eleven** answers.

Number **nine received nine** answers.

Number **ten received twelve** answers.

One had no **answer.**

8. Did we use enough examples to support the subjects that were presented?

42 answered: "Yes."

"Yes. Excellent group interchange and discussions of the examples."

"Yes. Some examples were very familiar."

"The examples and participation was very good."

"Yes, but more would have had a better impact."

"The examples my co-workers gave wer good examples to the subjects discussed."

"Some areas could have used more discussion and more time."

"No. I would have liked more on how to deal with difficult situations."

One did not answer.

9. Did we lose you as a participant at any time during the sessions?

Two answered yes.

If you answered yes, how can we prevent this from happening in future sessions?

"Shorter---more detailed information."

"Having non-lunch sessions on campus."

48 answered no.

10. What would you suggest to improve this program the next time it's presented?

Twenty-one did not answer.

"This was probably better than doing it in one day."

"On a day other than Wednesday."

"The room was a little crowded."

"Use less videos and have more group discussions."

"More group discussions."

"Do entire session in one day."

"More group discussion."

"More and different video presentations and examples."

"Have this program for administrators also faculty."

"Invite teachers and supervisors."

"Invite the teachers and supervisors."

"Offer to faculty and administration along with classified."

"That administrators and faculty be included."

"Faculty and staff to partisapate (sic) together."

"I wish we could all meet together."

"Expand (and/or adapt) materials for faculty and administrative staff."

"Have all the administrators and teachers present."

"The video tapes could be eliminated or, at least, livened up."

"It was very well presented."

"More on self-esteem."

"Maybe more time."

"Maybe have a one day session instead of three days (2 hours each)."

"2 sessions---more detailed information."

"More discussion."

"None; don't ever mix support staff with faculty and administration."

"Very well presented."

"More discussion---maybe another session (#4) to allow for this. Also a better setup not in an L shape---it made it a little hard to communicate."

"Need more time."

"Maybe more group discussion."

11. What do you think was your greatest personal achievement as a result of participating in the **CONNECTIONS** program?

"It made me aware of my behavior with students and co-workers."

"Understanding we can control some situations."

"It has made me a more conscientious person. I feel better about myself."

"I'm more conscious of how I act around co-workers."

"I've learned to "think" before I act."

"Learning a positive image."

"It made me remember to take a little extra time and effort to create positive situations."

"I learned that I should be nicer and more understanding of co-workers."

"Understanding of self in relation to others."

"Getting to know people don't get to relate to in everyday job. Learn how I can change to make more positive feelings."

"Motivation or reminder to concentrate on delivering good services."

"I saw myself as a I really am."

"Made me more aware of how other people perceive my actions."

"Met several new people."

"Taking a closer look at myself."

"Becoming more sensitive to other peoples needs."

"It made me think about answers and the way I react to people before I do it."

"Being able to interact with fellow employees---sharing their ideas."

"More aware of others."

"I am now more aware of how I treat others and how they perceive my behavior."

"I have become more aware of my interactions with others."

"Watching the messages I send out during interfacings with others."

"You're not alone in the negative. Others will try to help you see the positive."

"Realizing the importance of good service and see how great the service really is at the college."

"To stop and take time for others as well as yourself."

"To get to know people better and listen to them."

"Working together as a group."

"I fount (sic) out a lot about my self and others. And how to get along."

"Ability to discuss our problems & communicate better with our co-workers."

"Being able to listen to others with similar problems and how they cope or solve them."

"To be a little more understanding."

"I feel I will be more confident dealing with others."

"It has made me more aware of positive (strokes)."

"Kay did a super job---professional but warm. Made me aware that I need to take time to give positive strokes."

"Being reminded that everyone is human, everyone has a bad day, but we must always remember the effect that we have on others & always be courteous and helpful---we'd want that from others."

"Noticed more about one's own personal attitude."

"I felt a part of MECC and learned a lot about my co-workers."

"It helped me to realize how important it is to show a positive attitude to students."

"Better (more positive) feelings about what I do on my job day-to-day."

"To have a better attitude towards my job and students."

"Learning ideas from others."

"Relaxation when speaking out during group discussions."

"Being more aware of positive strokes."

Other comments:

"Supervisors also need this program."

"Present this program to faculty and adminstration."

"This should be also given to staff and faculty."

"Offer this same prgm to supervisors & administrators, etc. This would help elim. some prob. & help reinforce what we have learned so we can use our new communication skills & not get fired."

"Really good. One suggestion , the administrators and faculty need to participate in this effort."

"Thank you. Our faculty and administrators would benefit greatly."

"The same seminar should be offered for faculty and administrators."

"This would be great for administrators and faculty."

"Everyone should have a copy of the text for future reference. Recommend this course for admin. & instructors."

"Administrators and faculty should take course."

"Should be presented to faculty and administrators. Enjoyed it very much."

"Faculty need a similar workshop. Most of the negative examples of poor student service that I am aware of are faculty/student situations. I seldom have a student come in to my office and complain about a staff person being rude or insensitive---usually the complaints are about teachers."

"This class definitely administration Department and supervisors."

"I think administrators and faculty should watch."

"I enjoyed. I think we need to be refreshed often. Instructors and administrators need this seminar."

"I enjoyed this session & it was a good reminder of things to keep in mind."

"This group session makes one aware of how others perceive us and what we need to realize."

"I really enjoyed this. It was a nice experience."

"I enjoyed the sessions very much."

"I enjoyed the interaction with other employees who I have limited contact."

"Enjoyed group discussions."

"I enjoyed this very much and feel it will be a great asset to me in dealing with people."

"This was a very good course."

"I thought that the session was really helpful to me and the instructor was also good."

"Enjoyed the instructor---she project (sic) a good image in many ways."

"Enjoyable experience!"

"Good motivator."

"I have really enjoyed Mrs. Bower's lectures."

"Kay, thank you for taking the time to help us to help others."

"Kay, thanks for taking the time to show us how to deal with ourselves and others."

"The lady was very nice that presented the program."

"I appreciate the time Kay spent with us. I think she did a very good job. Our faculty and admin. would benefit! from this."

Short version of survey:

1. Over one-half of participants rated the program 8 or above.
2. Most participants said that discussion with other staff members was the most valuable part of the experience.
3. Over one-half of the participants did not respond to "Which part of the program did you find of the least value?"
4. Forty-three out of 50 responded that the program was about right in length.
5. Forty-two out of 50 would strongly recommend the program to other people in jobs similar to theirs.
6. Over one-half said that information, ideas, and materials to provide customer relations and services understanding were successfully presented.
7. Over one-half thought that the material was effectively presented. Nearly one-half did not respond. Over one-half said that the videotapes and exercises were useful.
8. Forty-two out of 50 said that enough examples were used.
9. Forty-eight out of 50 said that they were never lost as a participant.
10. Over one-half offered suggestions to improve the program. Nearly one-half did not respond.
11. Most participants said they examined their own attitudes and performance more closely after the workshop. (Several changes were noticeable after the workshop.)

    Nearly all participants made a point of stating that supervisors, other administrators and faculty should have to participate in such a workshop.

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